

Composition and the Search for Self-Awareness

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Abstract

Composition studies saw several cogent criticisms of expressivism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some scholars assume that those criticisms discredited expressivism in composition studies, ending the focus on assignments that ask students to write personal, supposedly introspective papers that were believed to lead to self-awareness and self-identity. Even so, recent research suggests that the expressivist pedagogical orientation is still widely used in writing classes across the US. Joshua Hilst (2012) sought to rehabilitate expressivism by drawing on the work of philosopher Giles Deleuze, arguing that neo-expressivism provides a palliative to those criticisms. In this regard, Hilst's analysis follows the current trend of applying Deleuze's philosophy to a variety of fields. The present analysis therefore consists of two parts, both with pedagogical implications. First, it examines Deleuze's work and illustrates how his neo-expressivism and views on writing are incongruent with the expressivism applied in composition studies. Second, it examines the psychological research on introspection and self-awareness that has demonstrated with considerable consistency the opacity of mental processes and the difficulty associated with gaining any sense of self-awareness or self-identity.

Keywords: Deleuze; self-awareness; expressivism; neo-expressivism; self-identity; composition studies

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, composition studies saw several cogent criticisms of expressivism—the focus on writing assignments that asked students to produce personal, supposedly introspective papers that were believed to lead to self-awareness and self-identity (e.g., Bartholomae, 1985; Bizzzell, 1993). These criticisms led Joshua Hilst (2012) to argue in “Deleuze: (Neo)Expressivism” that for many

scholars and practitioners in composition studies “expressionism has fallen out of favor [because] . . . it is a hopelessly naïve school of thought, thoroughly discredited in our field” (p. 1). Nevertheless, Hilst noted that expressionism (or what I prefer to call “expressivism”) maintains a strong appeal among scholars and practitioners. The appeal is based on “something in . . . [the] ideals of authenticity, [and] honesty . . . that encourages students to express a central self in discourse—a self that emerges through an authenticity of voice” (p. 1). As one of those compositionists who experiences that strong appeal, Hilst sought to rehabilitate expressivism by drawing on the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze, arguing that neo-expressivism provides a palliative to criticisms. In Hilst’s view, Deleuze offers the means to “preserve, in some form or another, some of the commitments of the expressionists” (p. 1).

What follows is a brief discussion of Deleuze showing that his neo-expressivism has little in common with the classically oriented expressivism applied in composition studies. This discussion is complemented by a consideration of the psychological research on self-expression and self-awareness, illustrating how expressivist pedagogy is based on a misunderstanding of our ability to engage in self-reflection.

The Expressivist Perspectives in Composition Studies

Hilt’s (2012) argument reflects what has become a current trend—applying Deleuze’s philosophy to a variety of fields. The question is whether it is relevant to composition studies. Synthesizing expressivist perspectives into a pithy statement is not possible because they vary considerably, but sampling some of the principal advocates of expressive writing provides a sense of the central theoretical tenets and related truth claims. In *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and “Writing, Inner Speech, and Mediation,” for example, James Moffett (1968, 1982) compared writing to psychoanalysis and psychic catharsis. Macrorie argued in *Uptaught* (1970) and *Telling Writing* (1985) that writing assignments should ask students to write about their own experiences and feelings (“Tell an incident in your childhood that struck you hard,” [Telling Writing, p. 285]), not only because doing so results in writing “the truth” but also because it helps students learn who they are.

Building on these foundations, Ann Murphy (1989) argued that expressivist writing assignments, like psychoanalysis, involves “an intensely personal relationship in which two people . . . establish trust beyond the apparent limitations of their institutional roles, in order that they both might learn and one might achieve a less marginal, more fully articulated life” (p. 181). Joseph Comprone (1985) claimed that “Expressive discourse . . . is a means whereby writers become self-conscious, where they come to know the origins and patterns of their thought” (p. 36). Christopher Burnham (2013) argued that expressivist pedagogy aims “to foster a writer’s aesthetic, cognitive, and moral development” (p. 667). Writing about Donald Murray, Irene Ward (1994) noted that Murray’s goal in *Write to Learn* (1984) for each student was to ensure that writing was the “personal discovery of his or her identity” (p. 22). Greene (2010) proposed that trauma narratives in the composition class result in “emotionally healthy outcomes and improved academic performance in those who disclose traumatic events through writing” (p. 37). Nick Tingle (2004) argued that the writing class should destabilize students’ sense of self and claimed that expressive pedagogy serves both to deconstruct the old self and to construct a new—and by implication a better—one. The writing teacher assumes the role of an empathetic mother so that “The student . . . , like the infant, . . . might acquire the support necessary for the restructuring of self” (p. 26).

The emphasis on authenticity, self-awareness, identity, and the supposed psychological benefits of expressive writing for students is strong in the work of all these principal figures, and the Freudian alignment is easily recognizable, as in Bracher’s (1999) *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education*. The writing cure relies on memory and a willingness to call forth private memories and make them public. Hilst’s (2012) reading of Deleuze fits within this paradigm, as when he states that the philosopher’s views on memory are “a powerfully expressive and inventive force” that necessarily entails a “relation to invention (specifically as a source of invention)” (p. 1). What emerges from the resulting triad—memory/invention/self-expressive writing—is an algorithm that is believed to lead to improved writing and a more self-aware student.

The problem is that Hilst (2012) seems to have misunderstood Deleuze while ignoring the psychological factors that challenge the self-expressivist claims.

Classical Expressivism & Neo-Expressivism

Philosophical neo-expressivism developed as a response to classical expressivism, which examines the role of discourse in communicating sentiments, mental states, and attitudes, with special emphasis on how ethical avowals express motivational states. Classical expressivism was influenced by the Cartesian concept of the disembodied mind, which proposes that our thoughts are accessible through reflection or introspection and that they are epistemically grounded, leading to self-knowledge. Cartesianism also maintains that the content of linguistic acts corresponds to the world we experience, including the mental world of thought. In the context of self-expressive writing, the content necessarily corresponds to the writer's mental world and what Macrorie (1970) referred to as a "truthful memory" (p. 117).

Brian Massumi (2002) observed in *A Shock to Thought* that objections to classical expressivism have been based, in part, on the perception that it is an exercise in "uncritical subjectivism" (xiii) that renders suspect its theoretical underpinnings as well as its claimed outcomes. The inherent subjectivity of the mentalistic or linguistic act not only establishes its validity but also posits the speaker as the ontological source of the representation. Tanney (2013) noted that, on this ground, the Cartesian view grants an unchallengeable authority to self-ascriptions of mental states. Likewise, Crispin Wright (2000) explained that we do not challenge self-ascriptions because we grant them authority through a concessive act. Self-ascriptions of mental states, in other words, are avowals, and expressivism maintains that there is a relation between the semantic content and motivational states of mind.

Neo-expressivism emerged as scholars sought to address the problems of authority associated with classical expressivism, principally the question of whether avowals do represent motivational states of mind. Dorit Bar-On (2012), for example, argued that "avowable mental states are thought to be 'self-intimating': one who is in a mental state is guaranteed to know it" through introspection ("Ethical Neo-Expressivism," p. 165). In *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge* (2004), she proposed separating the semantics of avowals from their epistemology.

This proposal appears to be a step in the right direction. The conative nature of an avowal as a speech act allows for the expression of feeling, self-knowledge, etc., without actually involving any claim that the avowal is veridical. "I am tired," for example, in many situations could function as an indirect speech act to persuade the addressee to perform an action. In such an instance, the avowal is just as truth-apt and challengeable as the statement "My hair is black" and does not reflect my state of mind or my self-knowledge. It could more readily reflect the context in which I uttered the statement as well as my knowledge of the addressee and my understanding of indirect speech acts and their performative force.

Some neo-expressivists have responded by proposing that avowals do not represent the motivational states of ethical claims (Bar-On & Chrisman, 2009). In uttering "Greed is good," for example, I can make a statement that appears to be true without believing it to be true. The assertoric nature of the discourse act allows for the expression of feeling without involving any claim that the statement is true or that it is self-ascribing. Knowing the ascriptive value of the utterance requires understanding my motivational state.

This approach can be applied not just to avowals like "I am tired" and "Greed is good" but to all expressive statements if we consider Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle. We generally operate cooperatively in conversations even when we disagree with the speaker. We may know that a statement is false or ethically questionable, as with "Greed is good," but we nevertheless tend to avoid challenging the veracity or the ethics of the speaker because we assume that the speaker's motivational state is cooperative rather than uncooperative, rendering any challenge on our part socially unacceptable. In addition, more often than not we have no way of checking the veracity of many statements, especially if they are personal, such as "I am tired." If we understand that self-expressive writing, as a linguistic act, is essentially an extended avowal, we begin to see significant problems for expressivist claims and goals in composition studies. Teachers obviously have no way of knowing whether a student's self-expressive paper is a "truthful memory" or sheer invention motivated by a desire to complete the assignment without making private information public.

Deleuze and Neo-Expressivism

On its face, neo-expressivism does not appear to be related to how expressivism is implemented in writing classes. And when we look more closely, we find indications that the effort to use Deleuze's neo-expressivism to rescue expressive writing pedagogy is based on an inaccurate reading his work, raising additional reasons to question how neo-expressivism might support the "commitments of the expressionists."

For Deleuze, the affectations of the body are central to neo-expressivism, as we see in the case of avowals. A person who makes an avowal expresses a reflexive proposition that is truth-conditional insofar as its meaning relies on the proposition being true for him or her. Thus, even in a cooperative context, the privileged status of the avowal can lead to transcendent, but nevertheless false, consciousness. As self-expression, the avowal is a monologic self-ascription and thus arhetorical. Dorit Bar-On (2004) proposed on this ground that the result can be classified, if only in a limited way, as self-knowledge owing to the avower's self-belief, but such self-knowledge fails to achieve the status of the immanent ethical consciousness that Deleuze requires in his metaphysics, in which multiplicity replaces substance and event replaces essence. Such a metaphysics would seem inimical to the Cartesian essentialism that characterizes expressivism in composition studies, especially when we consider Deleuze's (1993) views on writing:

Ecrire n'est certainement pas imposer une forme (d'expression) à une matière vécue. . . . Ecrire est une affaire de devenir, toujours inachevé, toujours en train de se faire, et qui déborde toute matière vivable ou vécue. C'est un processus, c'est-à-dire un passage de Vie qui traverse le vivable et le vécu. (p.11)

[Writing certainly does not impose a form (expression) on a living thing. . . . Writing is a matter of becoming, always unfinished, always in the making, overflowing any livable or lived thing. It is a process, that is to say, a Life passage that traverses the livable and the lived.]

Although the relation between memory and invention appears relevant to students' writing, Deleuze's discussion of memory is not simple and does not appear to translate into the sort of static memory inherent in expressivist essentialism. In formulating his concept of memory, Deleuze drew heavily on *Matter and Memory* (1886/2010), in which Bergson distinguished two types of memory: "pure memories" (*souvenirs purs*) and "memory-images" (*images-souvenirs*). Pure memories supposedly exist dormant in the brain until they are brought into consciousness and "actualized" as memory-images (see Kerslake 2007). Bergson's influence is clearly evident in Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1994), in which he describes "ontological memory" and "psychological memory" in terms similar to Bergson's—one described as "pure being of the past," the other as movement of translation and actualization into action in the present. The similarity to Plato's Ideal Forms is clear, but the connection to expressive writing is not.

Because Deleuze drew considerably on Spinoza, it is worth noting that Spinoza argued in *Ethics* that the authority granted to avowals is based on a faulty perception of consciousness—that it is veridical and transcendent, free from the *Strum und Drang* of the world, and that it creates a Cartesian essentialist identity. This faulty perception necessarily limits the mind's ability to know itself: "The mind does not know [*cognoscit*] itself except insofar as it perceives ideas of affections of the body" (Spinoza, 1994/1677, 2p23).

In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Deleuze (1992) argued that expressive language functions as a means of ontological definition but that "'the expressed' does not exist outside of the expression and yet bears no resemblance to it, but is essentially related to what expresses itself as distinct from the expression itself" (1992, p. 333). In *Difference and Repetition* (1994), he took a strong anti-Cartesian stance and proposed that identity emerges out of difference on the ground that intrinsic ontological unity does not exist.

Moreover, identity is not grounded on difference in relation to something else—a similar token—whether it be an idea in the manner of Plato, a product, a simulacrum, or, in the context of self-identity, a comparison with another person. Instead, Deleuze proposed that identity is in an unstable flux, as we see in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where he stated that "there is no being beyond becoming" (2006, p. 23). In his final work, Deleuze and Guattari dismantled the very concept of identity. In *Anti-Oedipus*

(1983), we are “desiring machines” striving—and often failing—to connect to other machines. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), we see that “Becoming and multiplicity are the same thing” (p. 271) and that “A multiplicity has neither subject nor object,” (p. 371), leading Best and Kellner (1991) to propose that Deleuze and Guattari were describing “a new postmodern mode of existence where individuals overcome repressive modern forms of identity and stasis to become desiring nomads in a constant process of becoming and transformation” (p. 77). One might be tempted to conclude from Deleuze’s early works that Spinoza’s spiritual transformation of “*Deus sive Natura*” inspired in Deleuze a similar transformation with respect to identity—*Singulis sive societatis*—but even this seems off the mark in the context of *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Has Expressivism Declined in Composition Studies?

Over the last two decades, efforts to apply Deleuze’s concepts to various fields have multiplied (e.g., Biehl & Locke, 2010; Bogue, 2003; Lenco, 2012), with varying degrees of success. Hilst’s (2012) essay is another such effort, one that faces significant challenges, as indicated above. Moreover, the criticisms of expressivism in composition studies during the late 1980s and early 1990s have not suppressed scholarly interest in or discussion of this pedagogy (e.g., Bazerman, 2002; Hunt, 2013; Lo & Hyland, 2007)—as Hilst’s essay itself illustrates—and there is some evidence that those criticisms have had little effect on actual writing pedagogy.

Although not dispositive, a recent research project provides support for this claim (Williams, forthcoming). It involved collecting writing assignments and student responses from middle school, high school, and freshman writing teachers nationwide. From 1014 solicitations, I received 123 responses (12%), for a total of 323 writing assignments and 1922 student responses. Congruent with NAEP data summarized in Art Applebee and Judith Langer’s (2009) report on current writing pedagogy in the US, which showed an increase in assignment variety between 1988 and 2004, the materials I received included book reports, poetry, plays, blogs, letters, stories, as well as essays. The majority (79%) of the assignments, however, fell into two broad categories: (1) journalistic assignments characterized by personal (rather than evidenced-based) views on and/or responses to texts and social topics for a general, or inclusive, audience and (2) personal-experience narratives.

The most common assignment (46%) asked students to express their thoughts and/or feelings about a text. At the public-school level, the text was always literary (e.g., “In a short essay discuss how reading ‘Vato Loco de Maravilla’ made you feel about racism”; “In *The First Part Last*, we see how a teen couple deals with an unintended pregnancy. For the purpose of this essay, put yourself in the position of either Bobby or Nia. Consider the choices they made and write about why you think they were the right choices . . . or not.”). At the undergraduate level, the texts dealt with a current event or topic (e.g., “How has social networking impacted [sic] dating behavior on campus?”). The second most common assignment (33%) was more personal, frequently asking students to make private writing public through trauma narratives and/or confession stories (e.g., “Describe your most humiliating experience and what you learned from it.” “Everyone feels sad from time to time. Write a narrative about an event that made you feel sad. Be sure to use lots of strong verbs and provide lots of descriptive details.”)

Both types of assignments aimed in varying degrees to engage students in introspective self-reflection and self-awareness. The responses to the “Vato Loco” assignment, for example, tended to shift fairly quickly from the poem to the students’ personal experiences with and attitudes toward racism. The trauma narratives and confession stories seemed designed to function as a form of therapeutic psychoanalysis—that is, a form of “writing therapy.”

The lack of evidence in the composition literature to support expressivist claims for introspection and self-knowledge is striking but not unusual. In their analysis of writing research, Graham and Harris (2015) expressed their frustration “with the ‘pied-piper’ approach to instructional practices in schools (where instructional practices are promoted and sold with passion and articulate rhetoric, but with little or no evidence of their effectiveness)” (p. 90).

Given that self-expressive writing has been used successfully for several decades in medical and clinical settings, it is tempting to claim that we can transport it to the classroom. In the medical field, expressive writing has been found beneficial for terminally ill cancer patients. The patient writes about his or her

experience with cancer, expressing the range of emotions and challenges related to the illness and the end of life. Amato et al. reported, for example, that writing about these emotions aids healthy sleep patterns in the terminally ill (also see Brady et al., (1997).

In the mental-health field, many studies have reported the therapeutic value of expressive writing when used under the right conditions (e.g., Frattaroli, 2006; Marcelino & Figueiras, 2012; Troop, Chilot, Hutchings, & Varnaite, 2012), and it has been compared to cognitive behavioral therapy insofar as it encourages patients to examine life stressors and their responses to them (Craft, Davis, & Paulson, 2013).

In all these settings, however, the responses are confidential. They are not shared with other patients, nor are they shared with the therapist or treating physician. In our writing classes, this is not the case. The papers are always read at least by the teacher, and in many instances—process-oriented classes, for example—they are shared with other students.

Writing classes are not clinics tasked with helping patients, and it seems inappropriate to view the composition class as a venue for trauma narratives, confession stories, and therapeutic psychoanalysis. Expressivists too often ignore the fact that writing teachers are not trained therapists and that they therefore are not qualified to diagnose and treat psychological disorders. As Baikie and Wilhelm's (2005) cautioned, the therapeutic use of expressive writing activities should be conducted only in controlled, clinical settings. In addition, there is no foundation for claiming that, when it comes to introspection and self-awareness, the writing class should be privileged. Other classes—history, physics, geography, etc.—could arguably serve just as well but do not. We find no writing assignments among historians, geographers, chemists, etc., that involve students' personal traumas, identity, or self-awareness, which raises the question of whether expressive pedagogy in composition studies serves as a substitute for a lack of content knowledge related to writing.

A central issue in expressive writing pedagogy is the inherent essentialism of the reflective act. It is thoroughly Cartesian, not neo-expressivist. Essentialism emphasizes personal agency and autonomy, as well as the authenticity of the self as a static essence. On this account, advocates claim that expressive writing is superior to all other forms because it is more "authentic," failing to consider that self-expressive writing is an avowal—a self-ascription without propositional content that is granted authority through enculturated concession. Ironically, evidenced-based writing of the sort required in content-area courses is "artificial" by default.

Expressivist writing assignments also appear to be based on the assumption that psychological trauma is inherent in the human condition, even before an event causes it to manifest. Arguably, efforts to universalize trauma and psychoneurotic illnesses trivialize both. Individual students certainly may suffer from trauma or psychoneurotic illness, but assuming that they do as a class should strike us as unreasonable. Efforts to do so challenge the notion that self-expressive writing is authentic, for once universalized, the writing is unlikely to retain much historicity, particularly when composition students are expected to share their writing with the teacher and fellow students.

The frequent claims of authenticity in students' expressive writing are commonly implicitly, and naively, based on Freudian theory, which maintains that trauma is built into the fabric of human existence owing to what Stolorow (2007) referred to as the "absolutisms of everyday life" (p. 443). Self-expressive writing supposedly gives voice to those absolutisms, calling them forth and releasing them.

Outside the privacy and confidentiality of clinical settings, we have every reason to question these claims. As soon as student writers realize that they must share their narratives, rhetorical factors influence the diegesis, with elaboration commonly supplied as creative enhancement for readers. Furthermore, a retelling of the past involves reconstruction, which inevitably affects historicity because, as numerous studies have reported, the retelling alters memory at the neurological level (e.g., Campbell, et al., 2011; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). These realities led Fassin and Rechtman (2009) to note that "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize 'the way it really was'" (p. 16). Thus, any suggestion that memory is a valuable starting place for rhetorical invention seems highly dubious unless

we equate invention with fiction, for contrary to Bergson and Deleuze, there is nothing “pure” about memory, as work in psychology has demonstrated.

Reflection and the Struggle for Recognition

Although it is easy to view self-expression as nothing more than yet another manifestation of what Twenge and Campbell (2009) called “the narcissism epidemic,” few teachers are likely to accept this characterization. Indeed, expressivism proponents may truly believe that they are engaging students in self-reflection and self-assessment that lead to a discovery of personal identity. The assignments are assumed to reveal the nature of the object of inquiry.

As Alan Waterman (1999) noted, this discovery perspective—essentialist in nature—is based on the idea that one’s “true” self or identity is pre-existing but lies hidden. In other words, students are like texts, with hidden meanings and truths that require critical analysis to be understood fully. What is commonly ignored, however, is that self-reflective practice is not a reliable discovery procedure. When the subject becomes the object, the already simplistic notions of agency are compromised and problematized because expressive writing is a form of self-objectification that blocks the source of recognition (Marchetti & Koster, 2014, p. 3).

One result is a metaphysics that equates the self with language. The self—our identity—is simply a linguistic artifact resulting from reflexive linguistic acts. Thus, through language, the self supposedly can be discovered, investigated, analyzed, explored, shaped, and defined. Making self-analysis public concretizes the artifact owing to the challenges associated with retraction, and the self-ascribing avowal—“I am I”—reinforces language’s role in shaping the self.

But accepting this metaphysics requires that we ignore not only the role society plays in identity formation but also the power exercised by political institutions. Any self-ascribed identity necessarily confronts sociopolitical realities that limit its validity. Rousseau’s “natural freedom” is constrained by the social contract, and as societies become more complex, the power of institutions increases out of necessity, until the social contract is Hobbes’ Leviathan. In the process, the natural freedom to define ourselves without interference disappears, along with individual autonomy, and with it the monologic self (see Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). As Hegel suggested, the “I” becomes “We.” The individual becomes an intersubjective social construct as the “self” is subsumed into the intersubjective ideation. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) proposed that even this “self” might be a fiction, stating that:

There is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring-production that is mere fantasy on the other. . . . The truth of the matter is that social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions. We maintain that [there] is only desire and the social, and nothing else. . . . That is why the fundamental problem of political philosophy is still precisely the one that Spinoza saw so clearly, and that Wilhelm Reich rediscovered: “Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?” (pp. 28-29).

Essentialism contends the self is identity, but if the I becomes We, as occurs under a regime of resurgent populism, how does the *one* merge into the *many* and maintain a sense of identity in a complex, diverse society without succumbing to imposed servitude? The challenge seems insurmountable. The intersubjectivity of modern society entails that there is no “other”—the source of individual recognition and personal identity in Hegel—for there is no differentiation at the individual level, only at the group level. The struggle for personal recognition and individuation is suppressed, yet the desire remains.

Walter Benn Michaels (2004) proposed that conceptualizations of identity shift as individuals seek refuge in general “categories of personhood” (p. 60). The problem, however, is that when the subject becomes the object, “personhood” as a generic fails to meet a core need related to what it means to be a person—individual recognition—owing to the fact that a vast society reduces the individual to an anonymous cipher.

The resulting invisibility of the “I” leads to fragmentation of the “We” along the categorical lines of personhood: ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status, gender—all of the various subaltern groups that have frequently been characterized as existing on the margins of society. This

identitarianism creates social islands for which “authenticity” can no longer be spoken of in terms of the self; it is viable only in terms of strategic political engagement, most visible in what Jean-Michel Chaumont (1997) characterized as “competition among victims” (*la concurrence de victimes*) and in the transition from the quest for group recognition to the demands of the subaltern groups that their outlier differences be valued and even celebrated.

Hegel’s argument that the self is based on mutual recognition of the self in others suggests that the identity of difference is unlikely to satisfy completely in the face of a complex society’s influence, for that identity is inherently—one might even say deliberately—isolating. Charles Taylor (1994) recognized the challenge when he proposed that “We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through the acquisition of rich human languages of expression” (p. 32). He then went on to consider “languages” broadly: music, art, and drama, as well as gestures of love and a full range of human actions and interactions. The possibility of self-defining an identity based on identitarianism is contentious, but there is little debate that, as Sonia Kruks (2001) suggested in “Retrieving Experience,” echoing Deleuze, the politics of difference is driven by an ironic condition: a yearning to belong.

Because social islands are always experiencing erosion from the normalizing social forces of the broader society, they are sustainable only when subaltern and nonsubaltern groups are able to develop and share a paradigmatic identity more evocative than personhood. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Cathy Caruth (1995) proposed that “trauma itself may provide the . . . link between cultures” (p. 11). In this context, Michel Foucault (1990) can guide our understanding of how populism has developed an immanent, society-wide cult of victimhood in which confessional activities serve not only as a policing mechanism but also as a means of recognition, no matter how meager or how sordid the personal narrative. In *The Empire of Trauma*, Fassin and Rechtman went a step farther, arguing that we are immersed in the politics of trauma, with everyone claiming victim status not only as proof to support a right or a claim or an entitlement but also so as to affirm affiliation with universal victimhood. Even the confessor is a victim, forced into *malitia actus* by social forces beyond individual control.

This insight offers a fresh perspective on expressivism and the apparent failure of criticism from some of the more eminent figures in composition studies. As our modern society has become more complex and more diverse, and individuation outside the subaltern group more difficult, the expressive narrative becomes a sign-value, especially if the narrative relates the narrator’s victimhood or trauma status.

Tobin’s (1991) “Reading Students, Reading Ourselves,” although published many years ago, lends itself to this social theory, for he stated that “while we have come to see writing as socially constructed, we have failed to understand the teacher’s role in the construction” (p. 335). On this account, the perpetuation of expressive pedagogy may be understood as being central to teachers’ views of themselves as creators of their own narratives, their own sign-values, their own victimhood. Their writing assignments validate the enculturated orthodoxy of self-reflection and introspection as an authentic investigation of self. By requiring students to produce self-expressive narratives, by requiring them to make private writing public under the guise of introspective investigations of personal identities, composition teachers are confirming a group identity: All students are suffering from a psychological wound or disorder; all students require therapy—all students are victims. In the face of growing cultural diversity in our classrooms owing to accelerating South-North migration, it seems reasonable to question whether this enculturated orthodoxy is suited to the realities of recent immigrants. Does it align with their truths, their sense of self?

On the [Im]Possibility of Introspection

Debate remains active in neuroscience regarding just what the self is, but by examining the neural network some clarity is beginning to emerge as researchers study how the brain produces our unique form of self-consciousness. Imaging data related to neural architecture has led to some tentative conclusions regarding the self. LeDoux (2002), for example, proposed that the self is the byproduct of an enhanced neocortex, the result of a temporal component in the neural processing of sensory data. Pico (2002) argued that the self is the result of the brain constructing a sense of time to connect efferent and afferent data streams to project a representation of internal and external reality. Antonio Damasio (2010) proposed that the self can be described as “extended consciousness” that results from multiple

cognitive and noncognitive functions as well as from a sense of agency and ownership of internal and external stimuli, facilitated by memory.

Additional findings challenge the proposal in much modern philosophy that a sense of self involves higher-order consciousness. This higher-order theory necessarily must involve higher-order cognitive functions (e.g., Carruthers, 2000; Lycan, 2001). Various neuroimaging studies, however, have found that self-referential processing is domain independent and occurs across numerous neural domains, even such lower-order domains as sensorimotor functions (e.g., McKiernan, et al., 2006; Northoff, et al., 2006; Phan, et al., 2001). In other words, the research does not appear to support the higher-order theory.

Although these perspectives seem diverse, all are grounded in the growing understanding of neural architecture and how the brain processes and interprets internal and external data. This understanding holds that because the brain is embodied, mind and self are also. One consequence of this embodiment is that there is no essentialist self; rather the self is existential, combining the self-as-doer and the self-as-object. This subject/object duality allows us not only to recognize others but also to recognize ourselves in others. Han and Northoff (2009), using neuroimaging, explained this duality on the basis of neural activations, reporting a neural overlap in the processing of the self and “others.” They found that “the self” is the extreme end of a spectrum of self-relatedness, and the “other” is on the same continuum but not to the same degree. It is likely tagged as “like-self but not-self” (p. 206). This finding is congruent with earlier and perhaps better known research on mirror neurons, which fire mimetically in response to observations of behaviors in others (e.g., Gallese et al., 1996; Rizzolatti et al., 2001; Köhler et al., 2002).

Subject/object duality is constrained, however, by the fact that our cognitive processes are essentially opaque. That is, they are inaccessible, rendering efforts at revelatory self-reflection and introspection futile. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999) stated, “we have no direct conscious access to its [the mind’s] operation and therefore to most of our thought” (p. 5). Arguably, our access to mental operations is therefore limited to our ability to believe that we indeed have access to those operations and that we have privileged access to them. This does not mean that we are unable to think or perceive our thoughts, of course, nor does it mean that we are unable on some occasions to determine what triggered a thought, but it does mean that we are unable to analyze the processes that give rise to our thoughts, and it raises the important question of whether we are able to interpret introspective thoughts. We therefore should not be surprised to find that even the few well-designed efforts to facilitate introspection into the self and identity failed to produce positive results (e.g., Ferrer-Wreder, et al., 2002; Silvia and Gendolla, 2001; Wilson, 2002).

These findings pose immediate and significant problems for expressivism in composition studies. They indicate not only that an underlying assumption—that they ask students to write about what they know best, themselves—is false but also that reflection and introspection are unlikely to reveal anything authentic. The “competition of victims” leads students to fabricate and imaginatively enhance their work beyond historicity and authenticity. Self-expressive narratives, like dreams, are by definition unverifiable.

Additional research bears this out, showing that people’s self-assessments and thus their personal identities are significantly inaccurate. Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004), for example, reported that “people’s views of their intelligence tend to correlate roughly .2 to .3 with their performance on intelligence tests and other academic tasks” (p. 71). When Epley and Dunning (2004) asked a group of college students who were involved in romantic relationships to estimate whether their individual relationships would be intact six months later, the researchers found that “complete strangers” who received minimal information about the subjects were “just as accurate” as the couples themselves at “predicting whether their relationship would still be intact” (p. 72).

Likewise, DePaulo et al. (1997) reported that subjects’ assessment of their ability to detect when others are lying correlated at .04 with their actual ability. Even more revealing is Cross’ (1997) finding that, among a group of college professors, 94% stated that their work was above-average compared to their peers—a statistical impossibility.

A number of factors influence such findings. Perhaps the most obvious is self-enhancing bias. Quite simply, in a world with many challenges and obstacles, self-enhancing bias serves as a protective buffer. Less obvious, as Pronin and Kugler (2007) suggested, is that our biases operate “nonconsciously, thereby leaving their influence hidden from introspection” (p. 566).

Pronin (2009) concluded that efforts at introspection nevertheless seem to be effective because they are internal and thus unobservable and unchallengeable. Stated another way—and reinforcing our earlier insight—if introspective efforts produce anything at all, it is the mental equivalent of avowals, automatically granted epistemic and ontological certitude. Faulty mental logic leads anyone engaging in introspection to conclude that the effort was successful, a phenomenon that Pronin attributed to “self–other asymmetry” (p. 5). Noting that an authentic self/identity is expressed through behavior, Pronin proposed that the internalized nature of introspection leads us to disregard our own behavior as a manifestation of who we are while simultaneously believing that our observations and analyses of other people’s behaviors are correct (also see Marchetti & Koster, 2014). The result is what Pronin called “the introspective illusion” (p. 6) that our introspective efforts provide authentic analyses of the self.

Given the difficulty inherent in self-analysis and introspection, our understanding of who we are, our personal identity, is seldom congruent with how others see us. This analysis provides a realistic perspective on the expressivist papers that students produce in writing classes. They are likely to be fictionalized works produced to please teachers, or they are sign-values of victim status. In either case, these papers fail as vehicles for self-awareness and self-identity because they fall into the category of “fake originals” that Baudrillard identified as the cultural signature of our times. Perhaps it was on this basis that Joshua Hilst wrote, “Apparently, Peter Elbow is cool again” (p. 1). Actually, it seems that among writing teachers he was never uncool.

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